Scribners, June 1919
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SOME CHINESE LETTERS OF WILLARD STRAIGHT

By Claude Bragdon

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM SKETCHES IN MR. STRAIGHT'S LETTERS, AND FROM PHOTOGRAPHS

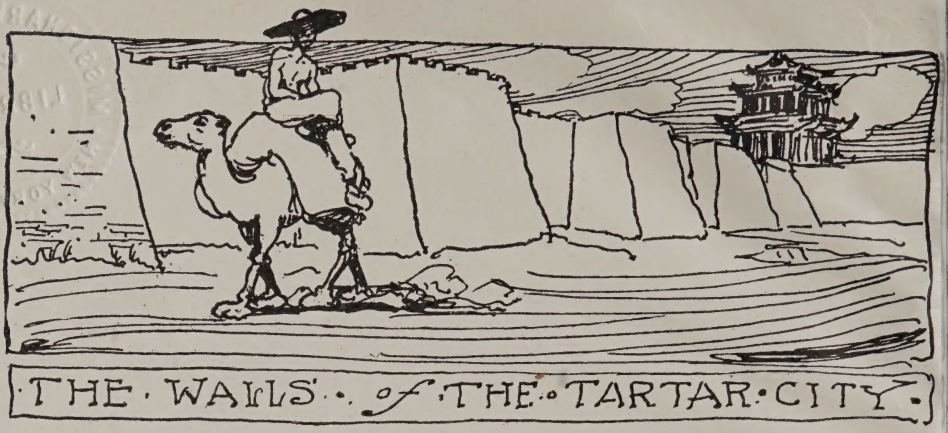
WILLARD STRAIGHT died of pneumonia in Paris on December 1, 1918. In his thirty-eight years of life—or rather in the final fifteen years of it—he achieved distinction in various fields: art, diplomacy, international finance. His brief, brilliant career abounded in amazing antitheses and dramatic contrasts. He steeped himself in the magic and mystery of the East, thereafter to immerse himself in the social and financial vortex of Western civilization. He was in turn an illustrator, a newspaper correspondent, our consular representative in Manchuria, a member of America's most famous banking-house, an exponent of more enlightened trade relations, and a major in the American Expeditionary Forces, attached to the staff of the First Army. He was equally at home in Buddhist monasteries and at London dinner-tables, yet through it all he preserved an utter simplicity and directness—he was never guilty of an assumed emotion or of an heroic gesture.

Last picture of Major Straight. Taken just before he sailed for France in 1918.

I first knew Straight as an architectural student in Cornell University. One of the requirements in order to graduate was a certain number of months of actual experience as a draughtsman in an office. Accordingly, he applied to me for a position during the long summer vacation. These negotiations led to nothing in that direction, but established a relation which soon became a friendship. I remember him as a modest, charming boy, with a clever knack for sketching. At that time the art aspect of his manifold talent was uppermost and covered his whole sky.

Straight was born in Oswego, New York. His father, who was a professor of zoology, died when the boy was six years old, leaving the mother to provide for the two children. She bravely carried on her husband's work of teaching, and being offered a promising position in Japan, at the Girls' Normal School in Tokyo, she went there with her children, remaining for a period of two years.

He thus experienced the seduction of the East when he was very young. He woke up, as it were, in a wonderland of sights, sounds, odors, from the sweet tyranny of which he was thereafter never able to escape. A born artist, the most powerful appeal the East made to him was the æsthetic appeal. As this happened to be mine also, I encouraged him in his ambition to go to China after leaving college, and there render the perpetual pageant of the Oriental world in terms of paint; for he saw the world at all times as the painter sees it—multicolored, coruscating, in the camera obscura of the eye.



THE · WALLS · · of · THE · TARTAR · CITY ·

Not long after his graduation I began receiving letters from him from China, where, a clerk in the Chinese Imperial Customs under Sir Robert Hart [1902–4], he was soaking up the life around him like a sponge, and squeezing it out again in the form of pen-and-ink and water-color sketches of a charm and distinction which can only be characterized as rare. The following letter, adorned with spirited pen-drawings, well indicates the quality of his reaction to the spirit of the East.

"My dear Mr. Bragdon,

"As you'll see, again, by the above" [a sketch of the walls of the Tartar city], "I am in the Northern Capital, Peking, most rudely torn away from Nanking and its steaming summer. But in this case I pardon the impoliteness of the Inspector General in ordering me away from my Chinese studies in the south, for he has very considerately put me at them again up here, and with a better house, better climate, and what's more to the point, better teachers.

"Then, too, I am well pleased because the place in itself, so many years the seat of empire, and latterly of the Boxer horrors, is full of ancient monuments, and, unfortunately, modern ruins. There are temples of all sorts and descriptions, tombs, and monasteries. At any time as one wanders through the crowded streets, one is likely to come unexpectedly upon some new wonder.

"Then, too, the streets themselves are great unworked mines, from an artistic standpoint. The contrasts one sees thereon: rumbling Peking carts, rattling slat-sided rickshaws, great lumbering goods wagons drawn by three or four mules, or shaggy ponies—or both, and then again, winding in and out, a string of camels, dirty, reeking with their own peculiar odor, blinking, as they pad softly along the way.

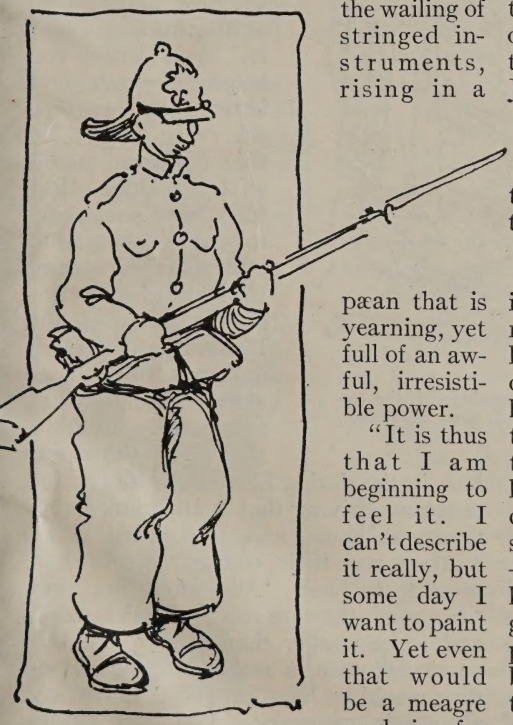
"Legation quarter itself is a veritable fortress, surrounded by a glacis on three sides, and the Tartar City wall on the other. The weary diner-out, wandering homeward in the wee sma' hours, is halted every now and then by a sentry, and must answer 'Friend,' and be told in Russian, or Japanese, or Italian, or whatever else it may be, to 'advance and be recognized.'

"The streets are policed by the troops of all nations; the duly appointed native guardians of the peace being by their own firesides, and the breakers of it everywhere throughout the Chinese City. The Russians are great, hulking fellows, bronzed and hardened by exposure and much vodka. The Japanese and English are smart and natty, our own men a bright-looking crowd, the French, undersized, dirty little beggars, the Italian and Austrian sailors a fine lot of men, but the Germans! Ai ya! Such a bargain-sale crowd I have never seen. Worse fitting clothes couldn't have been especially designed for them. Stupid and heavy, they are absolutely the worst crowd in Peking, and, for that matter, in all China.

"I am following your advice, and sketching incessantly. I spend many of my afternoons wandering through the streets sketching and gossiping with the

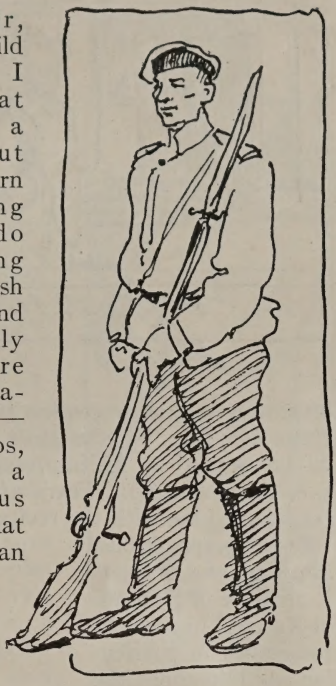
people, and on Sundays nose in and out among the temples, and about the country which hereabout is charming.

"There is a Spirit of the East. I feel it, all the time, and the feeling grows in me. It is indefinable yet, but there is something overpowering, crushing in its terrible strength, its disregard of human life. Here, where one falls and a hundred take his place, the Divine Spark is but a cheap commodity. There is not the Individual, rather, there is the Mass. This Essential Being is wild and ghostly—like the music, now low, now soft, thrumming, now shrill, screeching up and down the scale. It is full of self-abnegation, of fanaticism, of demoniacal cruelty, and Divine Pity, and there is a mist about it, a mist that swirls and eddies incense-laden, thinning for an instant to unveil the vision that is wrapt again, ere one can realize its full portent. And the colors are gorgeous, yet subdued and softened, the light is dim, there are the passing reds of human blood, tainting now and then the heavy incense-perfume, and there are wild bursts of song, and the wailing of stringed instruments, rising in a pæan that is yearning, yet full of an awful, irresistible power.



But the Germans!

"It is thus that I am beginning to feel it. I can't describe it really, but some day I want to paint it. Yet even that would be a meagre rendering, for it needs the heavy air, and the wild music too. I know that there is a chance out here to learn something and to do something but the flesh is weak, and occasionally—yes, more than occasionally—one slumps, and needs a strenuous kick. That kick you can administer if you will, for as I said before, you started me off some time ago when you told me to work at the Japanese side of it all. So if you would make a good finished product of the rough material, you must stir the clay a bit now and then, and I assure you, the clay will appreciate the stirring, and the stirrer. . . ."

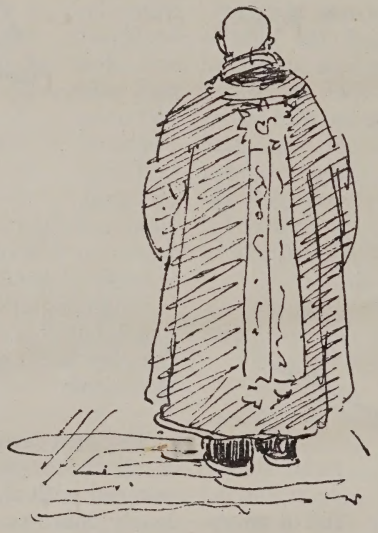


The Russians are great, hulking fellows.

The next letter (also illustrated) opens in much the same strain of confidence mingled with that natural self-distrust of lonely youth craving reassurance. In his own form of words, and confronted with his own æsthetic problem, he gives voice to the ancient plaint of every sincere artist: *Ars longa, vita brevis est.* Then follows an extended description of a temple ceremony which shows his extraordinary susceptibility to the purely visual appeal—to color, light, sound, movement. His knowledge of the Chinese language, together with his sympathetic and engaging personality, enabled him to penetrate deep below the surface of Oriental life, and the temple priest, so amusingly described, who served him both as a model and as a purveyor of ancient scrolls, was only one of

A · PROCESSION · of · LLAMA · PRIESTS.

an almost endless procession of picaresque characters fixed by Straight's clever pencil and sensed by his impressionable and ever-curious mind. Years afterward he entertained me with the recital of adventures as preposterous, amusing, and dramatic as those of Haroun-al-Raschid himself. I remember in particular one tale about the effort of himself and a friend to discover, by means of Eastern magic, the author of the theft of a valuable photographic lens. The commonest method—the questioning of an adolescent under hypnosis—having given no satisfactory result, a veritable high priest of the art of necromancy was persuaded to make the attempt. In semi-darkness, amid the most outré surroundings, after the performance of all manner of magical rites, the necromancer succeeded in evoking before their eyes a flat image—a picture—of a man with averted head. Straight affirmed to me that to his amazement and that of his friend this pictured head was then made by the magician to turn—hesitatingly, as though unwillingly—half toward them, and that it revealed a profile which they recognized as that of the particular Chinese official whom they had suspected of the theft from the first.



Long, flowing, purple, with the embroidered ribands down the back.

"My dear Mr. Bragdon,

"It has been some time since I received your letter, much longer, in fact, than I had supposed, and I trust that you will not consider my tardiness due to any lack of appreciation on my part, of your kindness in writing me so promptly. As I wrote you before of your first letter, your second was very helpful in that it started me off with an idea that there was something to be done, the goal to be reached by steady work ahead still within the range of the Possibilities, at least, and not to be considered absolutely unattainable. That is the great thing out here in the dozing East. One forgets the constant striving that is apparent everywhere at home, and is tempted to let matters run their course more or less, trusting to luck. 'And when they ain't pretendin', they are good.' Flesh is weak, and some weaker than others. In this particular case, a rather constant prodding would be most beneficial, not to say absolutely necessary. You have kindly consented to assist in the pricking proc-

ess, and I assure you, I am very greatly indebted.

"There is so much to see, so much to paint, and to think about, that the immensity of the task is almost appalling. One wishes for a lifetime of bright blue days, and even then it would seem hopeless, for it could be done so well, and the technical difficulties are so hard to master and overcome. However, these may be a bit accomplished even 'in the ride,' and there's a deal of pleasure in trying.

"Of late I have been Llamaizing, I suppose you might call it, lurking about in Buddha-decked nooks and corners in the great Mongol monastery, listening to the droning, chanting, mumbling voices of the priests—some of them rumbling in heavy bass, others giving their clear little boy-notes to the Song of Praise. There is a continual dum-dum-dumming of drums, the rising and falling notes of the trumpets, the squawking of flutes, the clank-clank of the cymbals, slower at first, then all finishing the measure with a terrible clash of sound. The service finished in one side-chapel, the Llamas file out, in their flowing crimson mantles, and their old-gold felt caps, like the horse-hair plumed helmets of the ancient Greeks. These men gather about the doorways or scurry through the courts to their cells, and the never-ceasing hum passes on to the next chapel. It is strange how very like the robes of the Catholic priests the garments of the Tali-llamas are—long, flowing, purple, with the embroidered ribands down the back.

Mongols, skin-clad, heavy-shod, unwashed.

"One Sunday morning I went early to the temple. They were preparing for a feast, for the courts were full of orange-robed priests; their crimson scarfs were fresh and clean, and they wore fur caps with yellow tops and red buttons of twisted silk. Friends of mine, from other temples outside the city were there, looking cleaner and more respectable than I have ever seen them look before, and beside them were many white and blue button men, magistrates in the city. I went in past the great bronze lions at the gates, on into the inner temple courts, and into the first great hall. Here was a yellow silk canopy, covering a great map-like affair. Six or seven men were sifting colors, red and blue and green and yellow, in lines and scrolls and broad fields. 'Twas the map of heaven, they said, and showed me the Palace of Lord Buddha in the center thereof. Moving in towards the other side of the room, I looked back over the group squatting and working. Around them were a crowd of onlookers, priests in purple, officials in silks and embroidery, laymen in the omnipresent blue. A shaft of light came slanting through the doorway, bathing them in yellow splendor, and deepening the shadows. In the full light several orange-clad men were standing, and their gowns shone and whitened. Beyond was the shadow, the green-gray, picked out by the glint of gold, or a bit of red, in the garments of the painted Buddhas on the walls. Rows of idols massed themselves dimly, scarcely losing themselves in the twilight.

A priest of the temple.

"Then as I stood there, drinking in the color, two mongols, skin-clad, heavy-shod, unwashed, came slouching in, their astrakhan caps in their hands. They threw themselves on their faces before the great smilingly impressive image, and prayed, their voices rising and falling, while from the chapel without came the low hum of the chanting priests. It was a picture to be painted, if there ever was one.

"Today I have been doing an oil sketch of a priest of the temple. A most disreputable individual he is, a thief and a blackguard—but useful. Already he has brought me four splendid scrolls, two of them from Thibet, painted in a sort of oils, on canvas, faded and worn and dusty. Two of them are of Buddhas, on silk, dating back two hundred years and more, for the date is written on them in Chinese. The colors are mellowed and blended and softened by time. When I come across a good one I will send it on to you, trusting that it may be honoured with a place in your brown and orange and blue room. . . ."

The following brief letter was written at the moment when Straight was just about to forsake forever the Primrose Path of art for one more dusty and adventurous, leading finally into high places and among great figures. Thereafter, he was to become an actor rather than a spectator in the world-drama of West and East. He makes me his executor, as it were, in the matter of disposing of six charming water-colors of Chinese types. These suffered the fate which so often attends things beautiful and rare: though much admired by connoisseurs they found no purchasers. Whether the series was ever completed or not, I do not know, but in any case this letter marks the end of his absorption in the East as material for art and the beginning of his absorption in its political, economic, and financial problems.

"My dear Mr. Bragdon,

"It has been a very long time since I have written you how the Far Eastern world was turning, and as a matter of fact, any letter that I might have written would have been more of the nature of a political treatise than a bit of respectable correspondence. Our minds have bee wholly wrapt up in the wonderment whic the rapid course of events must hav caused anyone who followed them, an which to us who are out here, of course has been absorbingly interesting. An now as a result of this mental develop ment, or deterioration, whichever yo choose to call it, I have burned my bridge —whist!—and am off to the wars as correspondent for Reuter and the Associ ated Press, with a sketch book in one han and a pad in the other and a telegrap wire around my neck. I am off to th front in high fettle, for I see chances fo much exciting experience, and many rea sketches.

"I am therefore sending you six draw ings of as many different sorts of China men; the series I started was to consis of twelve, but some have fallen into th hands of friends and some went as Christ mas presents. If you could do so, an think the subjects and the executio worthy of such a distinction, I should lik to have you have them suitably mounte and framed, and sent to the America Water Color Society's exhibit or an other. My original idea, when I ha hoped to go to St. Louis as Secretary t the Chinese Commission, was to hav taken them there, but that now hardl seems worth while. However, I pu them in your hands for better or worse and if you could exhibit them or sell them or both, I should be greatly obliged Some day I shall finish the task I wa forced to drop in its more or less initia stage, and the final results may be mor deserving of your consideration. But suc as they are, I will turn them over wit many prayers for their successful ventur into the public gaze.

"I trust that you are well and are find ing the life of a Benedict all that the poet have claimed for that blissful state. cannot write at greater length for I an off at a moment's notice and frightfull rushed. Thanking you in advance fo your trouble, and trusting that you wil not find the task a perfunctory one, I an with kind regards,

"Sincerely yours,

"W. D. Straight."

The next is written on the somewha

Picture of Willard Straight [centre], taken at the American Consulate at Mukden in 1908.

florid letter paper of the Hôtel du Palais (L. Martin, Propriétaire) at Seoul, Korea, and bears the date of June 4, 1904. Straight is now a seasoned and accredited war-correspondent "in charge," as he says, of Korea, and contributing despatches on the Russo-Japanese War to the leading newspapers of the West, and sketches to the *London Graphic*.

"My dear Mr. Bragdon,

"Many thanks for your kind letter. I was extremely glad to hear from you again, and to know, also, that you approved of my pictures. Your approval quite braced me up. Now this can scarcely be called the Front, though it's much nearer than most people have been able to reach. I have been here for the past

three months, and if you've been reading the papers you've probably seen some of my stuff. Bare cable messages can scarcely be called literary efforts. However, it means something to have been 'in charge' of Korea.

"I am now off on the most wonderful expedition ever arranged by any government. The Japanese are sending members of the House of Peers and the House of Commons, officials from the Foreign Office, the Foreign Naval attachés and several military men, with ten European and American correspondents to see the theatre of the war. The expedition goes on the 'Manchuria,' formerly of the Russian Volunteer Fleet, and captured in Nagasaki by the Japanese at the outbreak of hostilities. The humor of the situation is tremendous. Think of running a naval picnic in wartime, sending out sightseers by a government steamer timed to arrive at Port Arthur as the Japanese land and sea forces make their final attack. Isn't the situation attractive?

"Up to date I have done very little drawing—some sketches in the *London Graphic*, and that's about all. One's time is very much occupied in chasing from Legation to Legation in a wild hunt for the desired news item. However, the experience has been most interesting and I have enjoyed every minute of it. Korea is more like a comic opera than anything I have ever seen. Some day I will write you of it—some day when I have a little more time. Just now I am busy packing Korean chests and other truck I have laden myself with during my stay here.

"I am glad to hear that architecture and magazines are booming—that's fine. One of these days I shall drop in on you again. Till then, believe me,

"Sincerely yours,
"W. D. STRAIGHT."

An interval of three years appears to have elapsed before I heard from Straight again directly. The ever more swiftly flowing current of affairs in the East absorbed his attention and his energies. By this time he had attained to the position of consul-general at Mukden, an office in which, by reason of his intimate knowledge of Eastern affairs, his tact, his ability, his scholarship, he performed distinguished service. The tone of this letter, dated May 12, 1907, from Mukden, is noticeably different from that of the others. It is more mature and reflective. His attitude toward art has changed from that of a participant to one of interested, critical observation. He has glimpsed the truth that art cannot flower in any community torn by war and trade rivalries, and he has now definitely foresworn his earlier ambitions in order to do his part toward bringing about needed adjustments. In an article on Straight, published in the *New Republic* shortly after his death, he was characterized as pre-eminently a pioneer, and this is a true characterization. Yet how few pioneers are called upon to make just his sort of a renunciation—not of a country in which life has become intolerable, but of a sweet demesne in which his spirit was perhaps more at home than in any other.

MUKDEN, *May* 12, 1907.

"DEAR BRAGDON—

"Now that is temerity indeed. I wonder if you know the feeling that one has when one wonders about tacking on the tail to a name, or letting it drop in a desire not to be thought too formal—yet regretting the amputation as possibly an over-hasty claim of familiarity. However, I should have written you long ago for I want to congratulate you on being a father. It must be a rather strange and yet a very wonderful thing to look such a problem in the face. For it is the making of one cannot foretell how much that is in one's hands, and the benefit of all manner of experience that should be given, and which one would so wish to impress upon the growing mind, but which will, I suppose as long as we are human, be disregarded by Youth who prefers to learn from nature and not from a parental text-book. I've often wondered whether a boy ought to be taught to fight, and I rather think he had. Don't you? Don't you believe that beautiful instincts will come with age—control and regulation—while if the natural, primitive manifestations of a desire to excel or to conquer (which in the human male as in the other nobler animals must be exhibited in physical strife, more or less) are suppressed and discouraged, isn't the

esult more apt to be a weakling? And n't it easier to control strength than to irilize weakness? If I ever have a boy think that I should make it a point that e should never fight in a wrong cause, or ithout reason, but that if he did he would ave to win! Is that Christian, or not?

"I have just re-read your letter in hich you speak of Maxfield Parrish's ecoration for the Knickerbocker hotel. should like to see it. One admires his ork tremendously—though as you say, t is too literal, in a way—there's no sweep f action. His people are all mural deco- ation people, and not of real flesh and lood. Yet after all is it not possible that s decoration they are more honest and rank admissions that they are decorations —color schemes embodying natural and uman forms as the patterns?

"I should like very much to see your lesigns for the leaded windows. Haven't ou a rough sketch thereof that you could end me? You've no idea how barren ne becomes in this part of the world— ow much a machine—or an ambitious ponge-like being, dipping into Treaties, nd Regulations, and questions of pro- edure, or policy, or trade, with never an nstant hardly in which to think even of he better things—they are higher you now for they are enjoyed by those who ave won the right to do so after hav- ng passed through all this travail which ve are watching now—commercial read- ustment. I mean of course from a broad oint of view.

"In Italy the Renaissance came, didn't t, at a time when there was a great com- mercial prosperity, where the tradal rela- ions between cities were fairly well regu- ated, and when war had been reduced argely to a matter of the purchase and repurchase of mercenaries. Things were more or less adjusted, and people could stop a moment to think or to paint. Am I correct? They couldn't have done these things if they were all clustering around one market, clutching at one another, squabbling and pulling over taxes and freight rates, preferential treatment, and the confusion of political design with commercial ambition—could they?

"In Manchuria, many times, it is fas- cinating to think of it all in the abstract, but so frequently it becomes such a real- ity, so near and intimate a part of life, that it is impossible to secure the neces- sary perspective. In a way, therefore, you who at home have your plays, and above all your music, and your telegraph- ic connection with all parts of the world, are in many ways more blessed than we who are way at the end—the nerves far away from the center of intelligence and sensation.

"The political problem is a fascinating one, and I wonder what you would think of the fellow-countrymen of Hokusai and Hiroshige if you knew them as diplomats, soldiers and merchants, in a land where they were preceded by folk who had little sense of the finer distinctions between *meum and tuum*. I make no comments.

"What China is going to be able to do in these troubled parts I do not know, but it will at least be interesting to see, unless some sudden changes take place in the capital, which is not unlikely. We are to have a new Governor here—a per- son who has graduated from Columbia— who speaks English perfectly, who has passed through the Boxer trouble, and is as a result bitterly anti-foreign—but not in the old blood-curdling style—intelli- gently so, I mean, with a stern resolve ap- parently to wound them in their tenderest spot—their pocket—by refusing any form of mining or railway concession. He is reputed to be the cleverest diplomat in China and has stood the Russians off in good stead for some months in Peking. What will happen after his arrival, I do not, as I say, know, but that something will happen we all feel quite sure.

"I am sending you some foolish pic- tures that may interest you. With kind- est regards, and hoping to hear from you,

"Yours sincerely,

"WILLARD STRAIGHT."

The latter part of Straight's life, con- cerned as it was with large affairs both in America and Asia, is beyond the province of this essay, since the letters which por- tray this earlier phase end here. Few men touched life at so many points, and with such insight. But greater than his achievement in any field was the spirit behind that achievement, and these letters, written at a time when he had that leisure and liberty which is the

precious prerogative of obscure and untrammelled youth, perhaps portray that spirit more adequately and truly than others written amid the dust and heat of the arena in which his greater battles were fought. He died young, and his career was meteoric, but he was captain of his soul—the bow and not the arrow—and the aloofness from those passions which commonly muddy the wills of men who mould the lives of other men was held by him to the end.

To me he always seemed to be one of the vanguard of that younger race which is yet the elder, by reason of its greater wisdom, detachment, artistry in life—a race destined to unite not alone the East and the West, but continents not geographical: those hemispheres of thought and feeling indifferent, or actually hostile to one another now. Straight's work in promoting a better understanding between America and Asia was only the outer symbol of a reconcilement of ideas and ideals which he in his own person represented, and these are coming more and more into acceptance by free spirits everywhere throughout the world.

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF WALT WHITMAN

By William Roscoe Thayer

Author of "The Life and Times of Cavour," "Life and Letters of John Hay," "Germany vs. Civilization," etc.

I FIRST came to know Walt Whitman in 1885, when he was sixty-six years old. I had been living for several years in Philadelphia, where Whitman, who had a little home in Camden, across the Delaware, was a conspicuous figure. One used to see him of an afternoon shuffling down Chestnut Street, a man so unusual that even if he had not dressed to attract attention, you would not have passed him by unnoticed. Although he leaned somewhat sideways owing to his crippled leg, he must have stood nearly or quite six feet tall. His shoulders were broad, and neither age nor infirmity had broken down the original robustness of his frame. But what impressed you most was his face, with its fresh, pink skin, as of a child, and the flowing beard, white and soft and patriarchal, like that of one of John Bellini's saints. He wore a gray suit—sack coat, waistcoat, and trousers—which might have been of homespun—but was not, and a white unstarched shirt with collar carefully turned over on either side and unbuttoned, so that you saw his sinewy throat and a span below it of his chest, which also had its fledge of whitening hair. The broad brim of his soft, gray, felt hat shaded his eyes so that you were not sure whether they were light blue or gray, but you could not miss seeing the perfect arch of the brow over each of their sockets.

And so Walt made his slow progress down the street, dragging his lame foot along with a shuffling sound, and supporting himself on his stout stick. This was his parade. Nearly every one knew who he was; many nodded or said, "Hullo, Walt!" and now and then some pal or acquaintance would stop and speak to him. He answered all salutations cheerily and looked at the throngs which swept toward him with the same searching interest with which in earlier days he had scrutinized the crowds on the Brooklyn ferry-boats. His eyes were dimmer now, but his heart kept its old zest. Occasionally, he would stop to peer into a win-